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Linda McCulloch
Superintendent

House Bill 111
January 10, 2005
House Education Committee
State Superintendent Linda McCulloch's Remarks

For the record, I am Linda McCulloch, Superintendent of Public Instruction.

Thank you to Representative Branae for sponsoring HB 111, which is requested by the Office of Public Instruction. This bill represents the consensus of many educational partners committed to ensuring quality K-12 public education in Montana.

This legislature has been charged with defining a quality education. In doing so, you will address a variety of challenges that schools are facing to meet the needs of our students. By establishing a per-educator entitlement, House Bill 111 focuses on recruiting and retaining high quality teaching staff in Montana which is one of Montana's significant challenges. A per-educator entitlement will also recognize that fixed costs remain constant in our schools when there is even a small drop in student enrollment.

This bill allocates a payment of \$1,000 per certified FTE for teachers and other professionals to school districts, special education cooperatives, the Montana School for the Deaf and Blind, and schools run by the Department of Corrections.

Let me explain to you the challenges before us:

First, each year Montana needs about 900 new educators, to replace those who retire, take positions in other states, or leave education. The good news is that our eight teacher education programs in Montana -- five Montana university system programs and three private colleges -- graduated about 1045 students in FY 2002. Now, the bad news, only 29% of the graduates or 300 teachers stayed to teach in our schools. There are simply not enough teacher graduates to meet the needs of Montana schools.

Montana K-12 schools are not able to compete with the enticing salaries and employment bonuses that other states are able to offer our graduates. Some states even help new teachers with buying a home, thus beginning a long-term relationship with a school and community outside of Montana.

In addition, we cannot ignore the fact that Montana educators are aging, moving out of the state, and leaving the profession. Without qualified teachers to replace them, the high quality education offered by Montana schools is in jeopardy.

Our second challenge pertinent to this bill is that of declining enrollment. For almost a decade student enrollment has declined an average of almost 1.5%. This is not due to students going to private schools or home schools, but due to a decline in the “live birth” rate. Montanans with school age children or Montanans of the age to have children are leaving the state for jobs outside of Montana. The majority of our school districts are seeing a student enrollment decline of, for example, 1 student in first grade, two in second grade, two in third grade, none in fourth, 1 in fifth and so on. The decline may be enough to lose a teacher’s salary, but as you can see, there is no need to eliminate a grade level classroom. The school must still offer library, music, PE, arts, counseling, and other vital services. The school must still turn on the lights and heat. But, there is currently no way to counteract the loss of students and still maintain a quality education program. Our local schools have had to look at eliminating or diluting programs, closing schools and other stop-gap measures to deal with this decline in much needed education funds. These measures weaken a quality education.

I want to emphasize to you that the per-educator entitlement is not paid directly to the teacher. Rather, it is a new component of a school district’s general fund budget. Under HB 111, a school district receives a per-educator entitlement of a \$1,000 for each certified FTE and licensed professional. Certified FTE include teachers, specialists and administrators. Licensed professionals include nurses, physical therapists, speech language professionals, counselors, occupational therapists, and nutritionists. The per-educator entitlement is rooted in local control and is deposited in the school district general fund to use to address that school district’s specific priority educational needs.

School districts, special education cooperatives, the Montana School for the Deaf and Blind, and the Pine Hills and Riverside Youth Correctional Facilities reported a total of 12,474 Full-time Equivalents (FTE) for FY2004 as part of OPI’s Annual Data Collection. The cost of the \$1,000 per-educator is estimated to be \$12,474,000 in FY2006 and would be effective FY 2006 school year. As the fiscal note indicates, we have estimated an increase in teacher retirement benefits as a result of this legislation. Thus, the increase in the state Guaranteed Tax Base Aid (GTB) cost has been estimated at \$437,500.

Each school district in Montana is acutely aware of their unique challenges to find and keep high quality teachers in their community. Each school year, districts report their personnel and teaching assignments to OPI through the Annual Data Collection. We know for this school year 118 School Districts were seeking elementary teachers and most defined their search as easy or possible. Unfortunately, the same does not hold true for school districts recruiting educators for music, mathematics, world languages, counselors, special education and more.

Our Montana kids need and deserve high quality teachers and education programs. House Bill 111 provides revenue to help schools provide a quality education.

Educating our children is the best investment we can make in Montana. Please give our schools the tools that our educators need to engage our students in learning, to prepare the workforce of tomorrow, and to continue our proud Montana tradition of quality public education.

Thank you for your time and interest in public education and Montana's 146,519 school kids.

Source: Who Will Teach Montana's Children?

<http://www.opi.state.mt.us/Cert/Index.html>